Cumberland Chinatown: Place of Origin and Canadian Identity

Imogene L. Lim
March 7, 2009
WDCAG
Incorporated in 1898 as the smallest and westernmost city in Canada. (Cumberland 2003:6)
When coal was king . . .

British and European workers were paid $3.30 to $5.00 a day. The equally diligent and hard-working Chinese and Japanese miners were paid considerably less at $1.40 to $1.65 a day. (Cumberland 2003:8)
Philip CP Low (1993:3):

. . . those were the “good old day,” . . . I now look back fondly to the days when I was living in Cumberland Chinatown. It was paradise on earth!
No. 2 Mine in your backyard

Coal tailings

(CMA 040-001)
Restrictive Legislation Directed at Chinese Immigrants

1885  Head tax - $50
1901  Head tax - $100
1904  Head tax - $500
1923  Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act
Section 18, Chinese Immigration Act 1923
DOMINION OF CANADA
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND COLONIZATION
CHINESE IMMIGRATION SERVICE

This is to certify that LIM WONG,
whose photograph is attached hereto, has
registered as required by Section 18 of the
Chinese Immigration Act, Chapter 38,
13-14 George V.

Dated at Vancouver, B.C.

this 17th day of March, 192-

Controller of Chinese Immigration

This certificate does not establish legal status in Canada.
Chinatown’s Heyday 1918-23

(Courtesy of Shirley Tong)
Male/Female Populations and Sex Ratios of Chinese in Selected BC Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>M/F Ratio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>5790</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>10/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>2938</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>6/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cumberland</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vernon</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.5/1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nanaimo</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7/1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New Westminster</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17/1</td>
</tr>
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<td>1931</td>
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<td>1059</td>
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<td>510</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1201</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>2549</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>5/1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(Wickberg 1988:306-307, Table 10)
Creating Memories of Home and Place

Living in Cumberland Chinatown when I was growing up has been a very memorable time of my life. I lived with my grandfather when I was 12 years old until I was 17 years old. [...] [Chinese New Year] was a day when I would stay away from school to enjoy the festivities with my grandparents. [...] Grandfather would make his own floral arrangements for the New Year by gluing pink popcorn on these bare branches.

(Comox Valley resident 1 2008)
The first year I came to Canada (1949), I remember visiting Cumberland with my dad and visiting xxx and his wife at their home. The wife was working out in the field. We drove around the area. My uncle told me they had a store there and made tofu. They also had a gambling house. Someone hit the jackpot and the gambling house went under. When my grandfather pass[ed] away (age 60), my grandmother took the whole family back to China.

(Burnaby resident 2008)
A Schoolboy’s Memory (ca.1926-27)
Chinatown Remembered
1922-28

(Richardson 2006:34)
I have fond memories [of] early 1939 in Chinatown. Grandma xxx and I went into the woods to pick wild blackberries. There [were] lots [of] cherries, apples and raspberries too. [...] I used to cut small kindling and rolled his cigarettes and place them into a metal tin so he [one of the older single men] could put them into his shirt pockets.

(Comox Valley resident2 2008)
Cumberland 1960s

(Courtesy of Judith Walker)
I grew up in Cumberland Chinatown in the 1950s but by then the businesses were all closed down. Other than my mother and grandmother, there were only 3 or 4 other women living there. By the late 1950s, my mother was the only woman there and I imagine it was a hard and lonely life for her. She tended to her vegetable gardens and raised 8 children. My father worked in the family store in Courtenay and came home only on Wednesdays (when all stores were closed) and Saturday evenings, returning to work on Sunday afternoons. We moved to Courtenay in the late 1960s.

(Vancouver resident 2008)
A Place of Beginnings

Imogene Lim and Ken Lowe at “entrance” to Cumberland’s Chinatown

(A. Howe photo, 17 Sept 2005)
Remembering and Honouring

Coal Creek Heritage Park Advisory Committee, 26 January 2009

(Photo courtesy of Dwayne Rourke)


